

Adversity makes

Losing after great striving is the story of man, who was born to sorrow, whose sweetest songs tell of saddest thought, and who, if he is a hero, does nothing in life as becomingly as leaving it.

—Roger Kahn
"The Boys of Summer"

By Bill Glovin
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It was my second season coaching the town's recreational soccer team. If we really do control our own fate, I must have a death wish.

The first year was cake, deceptively, seductively easy. The boys knew the ropes and didn't lose until the final game of the season. All I had to do was show up, call in the score, and prevent them from mugging the bus drivers. It was hard to argue with the team wit when he observed that a coach is only as good as his players.

Convinced that there was nothing at all to coaching 11- and 12-year-olds, I re-enlisted.

This year, everything was different. Except for two or three holdovers from last season, the boys were new; many were playing soccer for the first time. I was trying to coach soccer, and they kept using instinctive football and basketball techniques.

I knew the season had started taking its toll when my brother asked me why was I mumbling "Spread out" and "Don't use your hands" in my sleep.

We had yet to play the first game.

Soccer skills — or the lack of them — were the least of my problems. Communication was the big one. Half the kids viewed me as an authority figure and were practically paralyzed in my presence. The rest were so brash, they made me nervous.

One boy came up to me during tryouts and stuck out his hand: "Hello, sir, it's my understanding that you're the coach of this team. My name is Robert. I'm sincerely glad to make your acquaintance, and I'd prefer to play a position where I can score some goals."

He went on to suggest that perhaps sometime soon we get together "for a Big Mac or two." On him, of course.

Our goalie was something else. From a distance, he looked like a chubby, pint-sized version of Woody Allen in shorts. His hands and instincts were dependable, but he couldn't see without his specially made thick goggles. When opposing coaches complained that the goggles were illegal, he would stalk around the goalmouth, squeaking that there was no justice in the world.

These factors didn't seem to discourage the recreation department head, however, as he ambled over and surveyed the youngsters during tryouts. "I might not know anything about soccer," he said, "but I think we're going to take the league this year. I can feel it in my bones."



His bones must have been rattling in the last quarter of our first game. The kids thought they were coasting along on their 1-0 lead when the other team scored a fluke goal and scored two more in what seemed like a minute.

"The only pressure you should feel is to try to do your best," I said in an attempt to boost my team's confidence. "Mistakes happen when you start to worry about making them. Just relax and have fun."

When delivered properly, motivating cliches and the big gamble are what great recreational coaches are made of. I never imagined the kids would take me literally. Where was Billy Martin when you needed him?

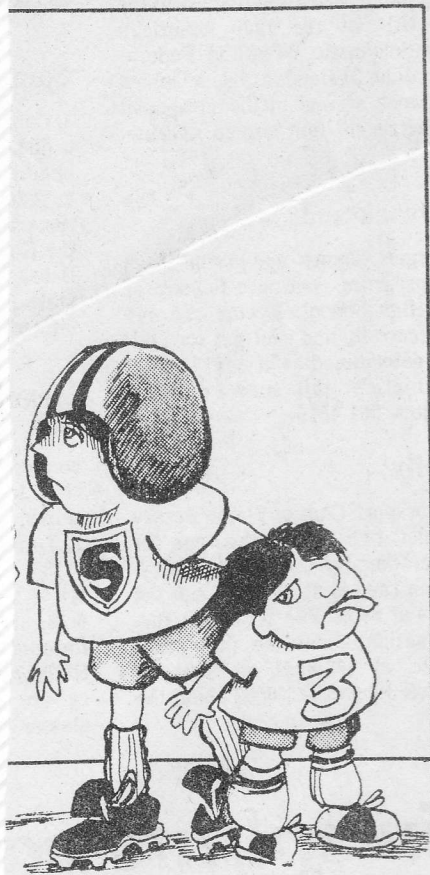
The season and my anxiety level quickly went from bad to worse during our next few games. After a loss, I had three players who trotted meekly off the field to complain that their small bodies were being abused by the opposition.

Everytime something didn't go our way, it seemed like the players, parents, and the passing hometown wino wanted to assassinate the poor referees. I suggested to team members that if they needed a scapegoat, I would gladly supply a mirror. "What's a scapegoat anyway?" one player asked.

At practices I tried to be especially optimistic, straining to remember positive reinforcement techniques from my college psychology courses and dipping deeper into my supply of coaching cliches. We started from scratch and reviewed the fundamentals — trapping, square passing, and supporting the man with the ball.

Since the first-place team was next on our schedule, the team wit this time asked where we could hold a service to pray for rain. This wasn't just another game — the opposing coach and I knew each other as season ticket-holders to Cosmos games.

coaching sweeter



THE RECORD, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 23, 1980

RECREATION

We practiced twice that week, and I promised the players as much pizza as they could eat if we won. A small bribe seemed like a minor detail.

Our boys were jumping up and down anticipating the opening kickoff. Sprouting from the opposing huddle were three very large, confident-looking 12-year-olds, including one who looked almost six feet tall.

"We'll beat them to the ball with our quickness," I told my team.

It turned out that they were quicker than we were. Their man-child left the crowd gaping as he took the opening kick, dribbled through my entire team, and practically walked the ball into the net. Before we could regroup, the score was 4-0. We were playing with lots of emotion and intensity, but someone had forgotten to tell our opponents to roll over.

In the second half, we came roaring back behind our secret weapon, a lad with two left feet. "Remple, it'll be your responsibility to shadow the

giant," I told our biggest boy. "If he runs out of bounds, you run out of bounds with him."

The final score was 4-3. I could sense that our boys felt a sense of accomplishment and a camaraderie as they chomped on a consolation prize of dry bagels.

Despite our 0-5 record, their spirit was holding up remarkably. No one had quit or stopped trying.

Our first victory came in the sixth game when I had to be out of town for the day. I was startled by the turnaround in my absence. At practice that week I was reminded at least once every five minutes that I was a serious jinx.

There were four games left, and we needed to win them all to reach .500 and a chance for the playoffs. We played a team with the identical record and won 6-2. We slipped by in our next game 1-0.

Our youngest player, Buddy, who had made the cutoff date by two days, was not impressed with our newly found winning ways. "Coach, I don't like playing playoff games on Friday nights," he said. "I'm missing too many good TV shows."

On the final day of the season we would play two games. We were actually doing too well in our first game so I took the starters out early and told the second string not to run up the score. It was like telling Tonto not to save the Lone Ranger. The scrubs scored 10 more goals, and I felt like Benedict Arnold on my way to shaking the opposing coach's hand.

"Coach, I don't like playing playoff games on Friday nights," our youngest player complained. "I'm missing too many good TV shows."

As we anxiously awaited the arrival of our final regular-season opponent, news reached us that our rival for the last playoff spot had won and gained the postseason tournament.

Despite the bad news, our boys peaked as a team in that regular-season finale, beating a bigger, stronger, and playoff-bound club 2-0.

The kids didn't seem as anxious to leave our final huddle as they had after the previous games. But the parents were growing restless, and it had been a long day.

If you ever need anything besides money, don't hesitate to ask," I said. "I'm more proud of what this team accomplished than last year's. Thanks for not quitting. I know I'll see a few of you someday on the Cosmos . . ."